DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 339 046 CS 507 547

AUTHOR Serini, Shirley A.
TITLE Some Influences on the Autonomy of Corporate Public Relations Professionals: A Case Study.
PUB DATE May 91
NOTE 27p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association (41st, Chicago, IL, May 23-27, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Communication Research; Interprofessional Relationship; Newsletters; *Organizational Communication; *Professional Autonomy; Professional Training; *Public Relations
IDENTIFIERS Organizational Culture

ABSTRACT

A case study examined the process of preparing information for publication in an in-house newsletter for a large organization, focusing on the factors determining the amount of autonomy of public relations practitioners as professionals in organizations. The subject of the case study was a communication and advertising department of a "mixed type" organization (large-scale, high complexity operation employing many people). Data were gathered during 8 weeks of participant observation, 2 weeks of observation, and 2 months of interviews and Q sorts at the site. The 18 employees of the organization who were interviewed were selected because they interacted frequently in the process of shaping information about the organization for publication in the monthly newsletter. An overview discussion of controlled media, a brief introduction to the monthly newsletter in question, and a discussion of the negotiation process from the perspectives of writing and managing the news shed light on the delicate balance between control and consensus in the process of negotiating the content of the newsletter. Four vignettes illustrate the process of how autonomy was negotiated in the daily process of producing the newsletter. Findings suggest a number of factors that may contribute to understanding the autonomy of public relations practitioners: (1) time, the primary influence; (2) corporate philosophy, used as a weapon in battles with management for control and distribution of information; (3) concern for credibility; and (4) the availability of resources. This case study supplies some practical information for public relations students and beginning practitioners in the field. (Twelve references are attached.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Shirley A. Serini

Some Influences on the Autonomy of Corporate Public Relations Professionals: A Case Study

ED330046

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Shirley Serini
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS507547

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Shirley A. Serini

Some Influences on the Autonomy of Corporate Public Relations Professionals: A Case Study

Much has been written about the professionalization of public relations (Bernays; Bissland and Rentner; Brownell; Center; J. Grunig; Hesse; Kendall; Lesly; Neyman et al.; Pratt; PRSA; Serini; Sharpe; Turk; Va. Leuven; Walker). This focus is an attempt to adapt and incorporate part of the larger body of literature on professions to the emerging body of knowledge in public relations. This is tied to an effort among practitioners to move the occupation of public relations towards professionalization. This movement, fueled by the Public Relations Society of America, raises a variety of new questions, not the least of which is a concern with the autonomy of a public relations practitioner as a professional in an organization.

L. Grunig, for example, discussed two areas of such autonomy: authority and clearance process. Under authority, she cited the following as possible explanations for degrees of autonomy: control over departmental budget, sexism, newness of the employee, distance from headquarters, routineness of the activity in question, the amount of money involved, and the values of the dominant coalition (L. Grunig 132-133). The complexity of the clearance process was a factor in determining the amount of autonomy the practitioner has as well.

It is the purpose of this paper to foster that growing concern. Using data gathered from a recent participant/observation experience, the process of preparing information for publication in an in-house newsletter will be presented. The clearance process is seen as a series of negotiations to which various members of the organization contribute from their unique knowledge bases. What emerges is an understanding of autonomy as the power of public relations practitioners as professionals in the organization to negotiate credibly within the clearance process moreso than to be free from complex clearance procedures. The location and strength of organizational power are the result of the interplay of several factors, including those noted by L.

ASSOJ1747

Grunig. In the illustration of the processes to be discussed below, the interplay of those factors can be seen. What this paper contributes to the literature is the understanding that power is based on the practitioner's status as a professional in the organization. This understanding moves the findings into the broader arena of public relations professionalism. It is with the literature on professionalism, therefore, that this paper begins.

Professionals in the Organization: Tension, Complement, or None of the Above?

The concern with autonomy grows out of the literature that examines the role of professionals in an organization. Some scholars contend professionals, as salaried employees, are caught in two "distinct, irreconcilable systems" (Harries-Jenkins, 53); they are "marginal" people (Scott 89), caught in the "tug of two allegiances: allegiance to the organization for which they work, and allegiance to the profession from which they gain their values and expertise" (Grunig and Hunt 64). A bureaucracy can create an environment that is stifling to professionals, whose potential conflicts include lack of autonomy; supervision by non-professionals; lack of control over resources essential to their work; loyalty to the profession and its ethics as opposed to the organization; and the professional rejection of bureaucratic rules, policies, procedures and standards (Abrahamson; Chartier; Goode; Wilensky). Ritzer argues that working in an organization can "pull an individual in a professional occupation away from professional behavior" (70). Etzioni adds that the "normative principles and cultural values" of organizations and professionals are "not compatible" (vi).

Others argue that the tension between professionals and organizations is either overrated or irrelevant. In some critiques, for example, professions and organizations are seen as two sides of the same coin that strengthen and reinforce each other (Haskell; Larson). Yet another school of thought calls for abandoning the notion that professionals and bureaucracies are in conflict. Dingwall and Lewis view work organizations as "ever changing and emergent social forms" instead of structures that produce conflict (192). They call for a reexamination of professions in the context of their daily construction and reconstruction by *human beings*--to examine practice instead of theory. In a study of news organizations, for example, Tuchman found professionalism among news workers to be "knowing how to get a story that

meets organizational needs and standards" (Tuchman 66). Other studies have come to similar conclusions: News is the result of habitualized ways of doing things that allow work to get done in a complex organization, and professionalism is a set of blinders used to frame what is and is not considered appropriate. Professionalism, then, in the context of news work becomes a means of controlling the news workers (Tuchman; Soloski; Birkhead; Fishman; Gans; Altheide). The question here becomes, then, does the same thing happen with public relations? The answer is no, and the explanation for that answer lies in the realm of power, which is an idea central to autonomy (Price and Mueller 41). Kornhauser argues that power is variously located in an organization, as opposed to structurally located, which facilitates a balance:

> The organization does not wholly absorb professionals, nor do professionals wholly absorb the organization. To the extent that a system of relations is pluralist, it tends toward a balance of freedom and power or, in functional terms, between the conditions conducive to creativity and those conducive to control. (293)

It is this concept of power that facilitates the understanding of autonomy and, ultimately professionalism, to be presented here.

Inherent in a definition of autonomy is the ability to make decisions, which exists on a continuum from totally controlled to totally uncontrolled. Total lack of control exists when, for example, the practitioner is told what to write and does so. Total control is the ability to decide what to write and to do so without any intervention from anyone. What becomes apparent in the case study below is that neither extreme is the reality. Rather, practitioners move within the continuum, depending on the circumstances involved in each situation.

Methodology

I spent eight weeks as a participant observer and then two weeks as an observer in a corporate public relations unit in a "mixed type" organization: a "large-scale, high-complexity" operation that employed "many people" (Hage and Hull in Schneider 569). In the two months following those stages I conducted 18 interviews and administered 14 Q Sorts at the site. Those interviewed included three public relations people, three communications support people, three marketing administrators, three secretaries, the director of communications and advertising, two vice presidents, one public relations staff member from another division of the organization and two

middle managers from the Human Resources Department. These people were selected because they interacted frequently in the process of shaping information about the organization. I entered the work place with the following question: How does a public relations worker accomplish work in an organizational and professional context? Of key importance to my work was the idea of professionalism. Using a phenomenological framework, I explored the workers' definitions of "professional" and the ways in which that definition influenced their work.

The weakness of a case study is that it is limited to one experience and one set of dynamics. The strength, however, is that a case study provides an opportunity to study in depth how those dynamics come together, to experience first-hand on a daily basis what one can only recall and report about second-hand in an interview. In the dual role of worker/researcher I was exposed to the daily pressures of interacting in the work place. As worker, I fit into the fabric of the department quickly. This facilitated my access as researcher, although it hampered both my ability to be in places of my choosing at particular times and to take copious notes. I transcribed the notes I did take each evening while the circumstances were fresh in my mind. By following the participant segment with a purely observational segment, I was able to observe unobtrusively, station myself in particular locations, and take more detailed notes. The balance between the two worked well for gathering information and establishing trust. I met weekly with a peer debriefer (see Lincoln and Guba 283) to discuss my findings. She helped me to keep a distance between the work place and my self, an important component in the trustworthiness of my data.

Confidentiality of source was a condition of entry, so all identifiable names of people, places and organizations used in this case study have been changed.

The Site

This is a study of the public relations unit of the Communications and Advertising Department of Unitronics, an amalgamation of three divisions of High Tech, Incorporated (HTI). HTI produces high technology industrial goods that are not sold at the consumer level. Under the leadership of a new corporate president, HTI was in the long, slow process of transition from being a conservative, closed-system organization to a participative, open-

system one. The new corporate philosophy called for "open and honest communication," among other changes.

Corporate communication was handled from HTI headquarters in another state. The Unitronics staff was responsible for communications about the divisions it serves. Their publics include employees, the local and state community, and the national media. The main Unitronics plant, in which the Advertising and Communications Department was physically housed, was located in a city in the Midwest. The physical plants for most of the Unitronics divisions were located in the same state as the main plant.

HTI and Unitronics were arranged bureaucratically, which is an organizing concept in which the work force is segmented into discrete and highly specialized work units. Unitronics employees were organized as follows: there was one Unitronics president, Ron, who reported directly to Corporate. Of the more than one hundred managers at various levels, less than a dozen report directly to Ron; one of the latter was Josh, the director of the Communications and Advertising Department. Reporting directly to Josh was the public relations unit, the Communications Services Unit, and the marketing administrators. Bill was the manager of the public relations unit. Under him were David, the newsletter editor, and Denny, the community relations specialist.

Josh, Bill, David and Denny did the public relations work for Unitronics; therefore, they were the focus of this study. It was with Bill that I was able to participate most closely; and it is in large part, therefore, through his eyes, as manager of Public Relations, that I was able to observe the process of every day public relations work. Josh, who was with Unitronics for more than 25 years, had newspaper experience, a bachelor's degree in journalism and advanced work in business administration. Bill was with the organization for 18 months, had more than ten years of prior public relations experience, a bachelor's degree in journalism, and belonged to a national public relations professional organization. Denny, who had two years of newspaper experience and two years of government public relations experience, was with the organization less than a year, had a bachelor's degree in journalism, and belonged to a local public relations professional organization. David, who was with Unitronics four years and had five years of public affairs experience, did not have a college education and did not belong

to a professional organization. None of them had completed course work in public relations.

The Case Study

Although the public relations practitioners at Unitronics were responsible for a variety of communication activities, this discussion of autonomy will focus on the process of writing for the newsletter. Four vignettes will be used to illustrate the process as a way to provide a deeper understanding of how autonomy is negotiated in the daily process of doing work.

Many organizations have an employee newsletter. Of interest here are the multiple influences that are a part of the process of preparing Unitronics' monthly newsletter, the HTI News, which David edited. My perspective on the process of developing in-house publications is an unusual one that bears mentioning primarily because it shaped how I came to understand the way in which controlled media are accomplished. I had two forms of exposure to the publications: one as a writer, from which I experienced the process; and one from the vantage point of Bill's office, from which I saw how problem situations were managed. Therefore, I saw the anomalies--the problems--more than I saw the routine. It is *the* combination of the two that shapes what I present *here*.

This discussion will begin with an overview of controlled media. The HTI News will then be briefly introduced, followed by a discussion of the negotiation process from the perspectives of writing and managing the news. What will unfold is the delicate balance between control and consensus in the process of negotiating the content of the newsletter.

An Overview of Controlled Media

In-house publications are examples of shaped reality in an organization. They are called "controlled" media because one or more people in the organization have the ability to consciously select each element--the physical properties of the medium, the graphics, the content, the words and the sentence structure--to present exactly the message that those one or more people want to present. Unlike press releases, which are selected and edited by someone outside the organization, controlled media appear in exactly the form and medium chosen by employees involved in the process. The final

product--the newsletter, the brochures, the video, or any of a myriad other media--becomes a form of formal knowledge through which others in the environment can encounter and inspect the organization.

The content of controlled media is negotiated among a variety of people in the organization. One manager noted that newsletters are used to communicate the "messages that management wants displayed"; and one public relations person called them a "tool of management." Based on what happened in the work place at Unitronics, those explanations are far too simplistic. Rather, the shaping of knowledge was a thoughtful and self-conscious process that involved legal limitations, organizational policies, competitive concerns, limitations of the technologies, and influences of the people who were involved in the face-to-face interactions that shaped how the story was written--sources, writers, producers, editors, managers, etc. Each encounter reflected vested interests that stretched and bent the shape of the knowledge until the moment that it was subjected to the technology and amplified.

HTI News: An Introduction

The HTI News was distributed monthly to Unitronics employees at on-site and remote locations, as well as to retirees. It was a four-page, full-color high gloss publication with a finished page size of 11 X 14. It contained, almost exclusively, information about Unitronics and HTI. Approximately one-third of the *content* of the HTI News was standard: particular columns and information that appeared on a regular basis. The rest of the space was devoted to features about Unitronics and HTI programs, policies, and management, as well as about Unitronics employees. Some stories were mandated by HTI corporate communications; for the most part, however,the content of the HTI News was selected and prepared at Unitronics.

News was narrowly defined almost exclusively by the Communications and Advertising Department. As a result, the news tended to be defined more as product and business news--news about programs, contracts, markets, new products, etc.--than as human interest news. The emphasis on product news came from its easy access--David, the editor, received a regular supply of preapproved news releases from the marketing administrators in the department, and their news was product and business oriented.

Writing for HTI News:
The Shaping of Language and Facts

The process of writing for the newsletter was controlled and self-conscious--not unlike doing aerobics on a tight rope. If autonomy is defined in part by the complexity of the clearance process, as L. Grunig indicates (133), then the Communications and Advertising Department had little if any autonomy. That, however, would be a narrow--and erroneous--observation. L. Grunig does note some contingencies: use of direct quotes, crisis or "major action" subjects, novel situations, political ramifications, the status of the person involved, and the time available (133-4). What is of interest here are the reasons and the process behind those contingencies, which leads to an understanding of the power of the public relations professional in the clearance process.

My first assignment was to write a story about the use of a particular group of suppliers. Corporate Communications sent print-ready copy about how they dealt with that group of suppliers at the national level, and David asked me to localize the story. The previous month, when he did not have an intern, he ran verbatim a similar story sent by Corporate Communications. My presence in the work place--the availability of resources--made the localization possible.

The assignment sounded simple enough: get a few local statistics, localize the lead, and splice in the HTI story. Four weeks and more than fifteen hours of leg work later, the story was ready to print. The process was much more delicate than I had imagined. The sources of my story were aware that not only would employees read the publication, but that customers, suppliers, competitors, and external regulators could potentially see it. The story became a soup with many cooks.

I interviewed three people in the organization, each of whom carefully clarified my intent and position with the organization before agreeing to an interview. Although they were candid with me, they were also very specific about what I could and could not use in the article, and very adamant about word choice. Each addressed my questions with great care and caution, and asked to see the article before it went to press. I agreed to do so for two reasons: Bill had told me that sources should have the opportunity to make sure I had represented them correctly; and, more importantly, the information they gave me was complex, technical and sensitive--a misrepresentation in the

story could invoke legal ramifications. It required knowledge of a technical and specific language that I did not have. I could write the story, but I had to rely on their evaluation to make sure I was accurate and not innocently presenting information that was proprietary or misrepresenting information that was sensitive. In this case, clearance was not so much a violation of my autonomy or of the department's autonomy, but a safety net for my inexperience with the organization and the subject matter.

Each of the sources edited the story heavily, making the majority of the changes in language. Some of the language needed to be more specific, and they substituted proper nouns and complex names for generic terms. Some of the language needed to be more tenuous, so they added words like "most" and "almost" to phrases. They changed some of their personal quotes to say precisely what they wanted to say. The specific use of language was crucial. For example, at one point I used a direct quote that included the phrase "materials we need." The source edited it to read "components we utilize in our products." David, in turn, changed "utilize" to "use," a verb form he said was more commonly accepted.

The entire clearance process for the story took seven working days. As David, Josh and Bill each agreed, the clearance process could be cumbersome. The marketing administrators, for example, sometimes waited as long as six months for approval on some of their ads and press releases. "If we had to wait that long," David said, "there wouldn't be an HTI News." David maintained more control over the story when there were fewer reviewers. He described the process of negotiation for control of content as a battle that he didn't always win, so he minimized his losses by avoiding the battles as often as possible:

> One of the best ways that I deal with those kinds of battles is minimizing the number of times I have to fight them. One of the ways I do that is by limiting the number of people who review. The fewer people who review, the fewer of those kinds of things that you're going to have to deal with.

Time increased the autonomy of the public relations unit by decreasing the number of people involved in the clearance process.

One source for the supplier story, however, used time to control information--he put me off until the deadline had passed. I discussed with Bill the feeling of guardedness I had from the source. Bill said it was hard to build a rapport with a person, to establish a trusting relationship in a

company as large as Unitronics where one might meet another employee only once over a period of years. "I can talk to Theresa, or Tom, or any of the others I know well, and ask them for sensitive numbers, and they know I won't use the numbers, that I only want to know them to get some sense of the magnitude of what the numbers mean," he said. "Others tend to be guarded." Because I was new, the source felt I was untested and purely by inference not to be trusted. For the first three sources, however, my position as an intern with the organization was my credibility--they gave me confidential information in spite of my lack of tenure.

In the interview following my observation period, David addressed the relationship between source and writer in the organization:

> We're communications professionals. You may be the expert on this information, but we're the expert on how to convey this information in the best way and the most professional way possible. You might know everything there is to know about Unitronics, but we know how to convey what you know . . . working together--between your knowledge and our knowledge of how to present it--[we can] have the most effective product.

Complete autonomy was not seen as desirable because the public relations professionals considered themselves to be generalists, not specialists. They knew the communications aspects, but they may not have known the legal, political and competitive aspects of the marketplace, particularly since the organization was large and produced a variety of products for a variety of customers. Some of the customers, for example, had written into their contracts the right to approve any information released to the mass or trade media about their business transactions with Unitronics. Ryan argues that "freedom to collect information" (480) is an organizational constraint on public relations work. At Unitronics, that constraint was not purely organizational. Customers and legal considerations, for example, are external factors that can contribute to the restriction on access to information. As Bill noted, trust was an important element in the interaction process. As he developed a reputation for being trustworthy, he was given greater access to information. Access to information is a multidimensional process that increases the interdependence of public relations practitioners and others in the organization.

Managing the News: The Negotiation for Control of Content

A story could become problematic at any stage in the process. Sometimes clearance involved a simple matter of correcting word choice or catching typographical errors; other times it involved completely removing a story or a portion of a story. The previous section dealt with the clearance process as it pertained to the way a story was written. In this section, the process of negotiating for control of content will be explored.

If the story survived the review by sources outside the department, it had to make it through a very careful review by first Bill and then Josh, both of whom proofread and edited the copy. Bill, who tended to be more participative in his management style, and Josh, who tended to be more conservative in his, often had very different responses to situations. David, however, made the initial decisions about what would be covered in the newsletter. Bill and/or Josh entered into the negotiation process when content threatened the competitive aspects of the organization, which often involved issues of credibility. They frequently engaged in what Bill described as "head-on collisions" with David, who adamantly defined himself as a journalist. "David is a journalist and pushes for journalistic excellence," Bill explained.

Although Josh described himself as a "public relations professional," he most clearly defined himself as a manager. As he explained at one point, he had to "think like a manager," and not like a public relations person. To him, being a manager meant doing what was best for the organization, not doing things because they were or were not a part of what he called the "public relations ideology." Bill defined himself as a public relations person and a manager. Unlike Josh, who emphasized his manager role, Bill tended to emphasize his public relations role. He saw himself as being a consensus builder; and, as such, he was frequently called upon to mediate between David and others, including Josh, in the organization. Each of the three men considered himself to be a professional dealing with other professionals, but other professionals from <u>different professions</u>, in spite of the fact that they all worked in the same department to achieve a common end. This resulted in an on-going need to define what was and was not an appropriate representation of the organization.

David's claim to professional status lay in his craft competency. He was, as Bill commented several times, "A good, strong, fast writer." He was

also a competent graphic artist who insisted on doing his own paste up and layout, which he felt increased his control over the publication. Corporate Communications mandated the basic elements, such as masthead and size, but the rest was up to David. In the realm of content, however, David sometimes struggled to defend his choices.

What is important here is that he did defend his choices--he did not simply do what he was told to do without a fight. He operated out of his sense of what it meant to be a professional journalist. Lacking structural authority, he used his temper to retain as much control as possible. A tall, strong man, he could be physically intimidating when he was angry, as he tended to get when he was censored. The ritual of fighting for his right to control the content of the publication went something like this: Josh used the structural hierarchy to avoid dealing directly with David. In spite of the fact that Bill's and David's offices were literally within feet of each other, Josh would tell Bill, to whom David was directly responsible, to tell David that something had to be deleted. Bill would explain the situation to David, then leave David alone. David would go through the angry stage during which he usually did some combination of talking loudly, slamming things, pacing heatedly, and telling one or more of the marketing administrators--within earshot of Bill and Josh--his side of the story. When he cooled down, he would go to Bill's office, present his rationale for selecting the information or story, and offer an alternative. Bill would listen to David's rationale and either say no or negotiate the alternative. Sometimes he would agree to assist David in negotiating with others outside the department to keep the story or information. At times the censoring of a story or part of a story was originated and completed in the public relations unit; at other times it was originated by and negotiated with a source external to the department. The examples below will be used to illustrate the process involved when the competitive aspects and the credibility of the medium's content clashed.

Monitoring Commentary in Controlled Media

On my first day in the work place, I witnessed a heated debate about an editorial David had written and Josh had deleted from the already typeset and laid out publication. I did not see the editorial and most of the debate had taken place outside of my earshot. However, Josh explained to Bill that he had "run it past" some people at Unitronics and had, ultimately, sent it to HTI

Corporate Communications, and they all agreed that it was inappropriate for David to take a critical stand in an internal publication on whatever his topic had been. "We're not the New York Times after all," Josh commented, a phrase I was to hear frequently throughout my study period.

In its simplicity, the phrase embraced the heart of the on-going process of defining what was and was not appropriate organizational news. It underscored the idea that organizational journalism and public journalism were not the same, although they both drew on the same craft competencies. Yet the fact that Josh, ultimately, turned to HTI Corporate Communications to justify his decision to David is a clear indication that the negotiation process is not restricted by structural authority. If structural authority was absolute, Josh would simply have said no to David.

The Impact of Time, Competitive Secrets, Corporate Philosophy, and Ownership of Information on the Plant Closing and Product Stories

In the two vignettes to follow, the interplay of time, corporate philosophy, competitive secrets, and ownership of information will be explored. Although time has been dealt with previously, additional influences of time on the autonomy of public relations professionals will be presented.

When HTI closed one of Unitronics' satellite plants, Earl, the manager of the division in which the plant was located, told Bill he would prefer nothing be said about it in the HTI News--it had been discussed with the people who would be effected and it had been in the bi-weekly in-house newssheet. Out of "respect" for the people who would be effected, he felt the situation had had enough press. Josh argued that a story should be published if they were to follow HTI's corporate philosophy of "open and honest communication." Earl agreed, but insisted the story not be published. Bill argued gently that it was a way to inform everyone in all the branches, not just the division. Earl remained adamant, arguing that his people didn't need to see any more of it. Bill disagreed, but told Earl they weren't "the New York Times," and would respect his wishes. For the next nine days, quite literally until the day the HTI News went to press, the plant closing was a topic of on-going negotiation.

Bill, Josh and David felt the censorship was a blatant violation of the corporate philosophy. They continued to discuss the issue among themselves. Finally, Josh proposed a compromise: if David wrote a short, straightforward

news brief, Josh would "run interference" for it. Josh felt the people at the plant needed to know that they were important enough to be in the company paper.

If Josh had so chosen at that point, he could have by-passed Earl and gone higher in the hierarchy to get permission to run the story. However, Bill hoped to help Earl understand why the story was important. He tried to use the situation to reinforce the corporate philosophy. "Josh made a good point in that the people at that plant might feel like HTI is suppressing the information or that they might not be important enough to warrant mention," Bill explained to Earl. Earl continued to refuse. Bill finally said he had a short story already prepared, which he would submit to the manager of Earl's division and the vice president of Human Resources. If they approved the story, he would bring it to Earl to "look over."

By 10:30 the next morning, David was in Bill's office to find out if he had heard from Earl. Bill told him Earl had refused. "It's a natural human reaction," Bill said. "If you have a wart or a cut on the side of your face, you'd just as soon not talk about it. If it's not positive, don't talk about it. I understand not talking about a bad product--this isn't that bad. He feels it's bad, it reflects on him; he's trying to be sensitive to the people at the plant. I approached him once and he said no. We approached it differently, and he said no again. Do I want to go to the mat for it? No, I don't." Bill and David discussed the situation, emphasizing the "open, honest communication" aspect of the HTI Philosophy. They discussed the criticism they had received in two recent surveys--a formal Unitronics-wide systematic survey done by an external research firm and the informal newssheet survey. Some employees questioned why they had to turn to mass or trade media to get the "bad" information about the organization. Bill and David felt this hampered the credibility of the publications.

"You just want to let this fall," David said flatly, more as a statement than as a question.

"I was wrong," Bill said. "We should just have run it." David shook his head and left the room. That was Friday.

David didn't let it fall. Early Monday morning David sent Josh a memo about "freedom of the press" with regard to the plant closing story. "If I had it to do over again," Bill said to Josh, "I wouldn't have asked Earl if I could print a short version, I simply would have done so. Since I asked, I

have no alternative but to not run the story." Josh agreed. Again they discussed the mandate of the HTI philosophy to have "open, honest communication," and how they felt they were called to violate that in this situation.

Later that afternoon David came to Bill's office. "I sent that [plant closing story] to the typesetter with the rest of the stuff just in case someone was able to see reason," he said, and left.

At some point the next day, Bill talked to Earl's manager about the situation. The conversation took place out of my earshot, but he reported to Josh that he had explained to him about how the employees were critical of the "happy news" tenor of the internal publications and how important it was to publish the story. Early the following day, David came to Bill's office to check on the status of the story. Bill explained that Earl's manager was in favor of running the story, but they needed to talk to Earl and "gently" get him to see the importance of informing the employees about the situation in an official company source as opposed to letting them hear about it in the trade publications. David told Bill he would have something ready to replace the story if they were unable to solve the situation.

The page proofs with the plant closing story came Thursday. David still did not have the final okay. "I'll get this to printing and tell them to go ahead with what they can up to a certain point," David said. The distribution date was the following Friday, so they were against printing deadlines. Friday was the last day of my observation, so I called David early the following week to see how the story was coming. "This issue may never get to print," he said.

I asked if it was the plant closing story that was still holding up the issue, and he said no, the news brief about the plant closing had been cleared. This time it was another story. He had written what he described as a rather routine story about one of HTI's products, had interviewed the plant manager and the marketing manager of the unit that produced the product, and had sent a copy of the final story to both of them for their approval. The manager had initially okayed the story, as had Josh and Bill, but then the manager decided to get his manager's approval. David had gone to press with the initial approvals, and the story was typeset and laid out. Forty-five minutes before the HTI News was to be printed, the manager's manager called to insist three paragraphs be removed. One of the paragraphs contained figures and the other two were generic comments about the industry in general. This

reopened the negotiation process. However, it was too close to the printing deadline, so this time David lost and the paragraphs were removed and replaced with filler. The HTI News came out on time.

There are two major differences between the plant closing story and the product story: one is time and the other is competitive information. The plant closing story had the advantage of time. The negotiations for the final form of the plant closing story were spread out over a period of approximately two weeks. Although the pressure for an answer was felt down to the day of deadline, there was still sufficient time for David to continue pushing for clearance to publish. Twice, when the topic appeared closed from the perspective of Josh and Bill, David tried different techniques to reopen the negotiations: the first time with a memo and the second with a technique of making Bill feel guilty for giving up. He argued, from his perspective as professional journalist, that the people had a right to know and that the credibility of his publication was on the line. Bill, who was sensitive to the human relations issues, and Josh, who viewed the situation from a management perspective, were torn between what they felt was open and honest communication and what they felt about the relatedness aspects of the issue. If they had not had the time to negotiate, the article most likely would not have run.

Unlike the plant closing article, the product article happened less than an hour before the publication was to be printed. Although printing was suspended for a short time, there was pressure for a speedy decision. There was not time to determine whether or not censoring the information was a legitimate concern. With the plant closing, Bill, Josh and David each had an opportunity to examine among themselves how they, from their different professional perspectives, defined the legitimacy of the censorship. They achieved a consensus among themselves, and then fortified each other, using a combination of corporate philosophy, concern with credibility, and professional skills to achieve the end they desired. With the product article, there was neither time to build their defenses nor to explore alternative means of achieving their ends.

The additional element of potentially competitive information also weakened their position. David explained it this way:

> He [the manager who censored the article] saw something in there that he thought we couldn't give away to competitors. What it was was primarily

> numbers--anytime you put a number in anything . . . they think that you're giving away information to the competition, because it [the publication] is a public forum.

The concern with competitive information--with leaking tidbits of information that the competition might use to put Unitronics at a disadvantage--outweighed any of the journalistic considerations that David, as a professional, might bring to the negotiation. This was exacerbated by the lack of time in which to build a negotiation.

One further influence can be seen by contrasting these situations with a reactive interaction with the media: ownership of information. When a reporter called to verify potentially negative information, Unitronics had a choice of either responding or letting the reporter write the story with the misleading information he or she possessed (Serini). Although a similarly tight deadline was imposed, the outcome was different: Because the media possessed the information, Bill's power to negotiate for the organization's response increased and his recommendations were followed. With the product situation, the organization possessed the information, which meant that unless they released it there was a good possibility no one would know. With the threat removed, Bill's power was diminished.

Professionalism and the Struggle for Autonomy

Control over information is a component of the autonomy of the public relations professional. Four different yet related situations have been presented, each illustrating different influences in the negotiation for control over information. In each, the underlying tension between credibility and the competitive nature of information was evident, and the varied impact of time was illustrated. Bill articulated the tension when he described David's relationship to others in the organization:

> David is very creative and very strong willed and knows the directions he wants to head . . . In pursuing those [directions]--and in often cases there isn't a right or wrong to the direction--somebody else could come along and say well, I would rather have you go in a different direction. Again, there's no right to David's direction or wrong to the other person's direction, it's just a difference of opinion [emphasis added].

Different workers, with different relationships to the organization, bring different dynamics to the negotiation process. In the plant closing situation, for example, Bill was concerned with how Earl was treated; David was concerned

with freedom of the press; Josh was concerned with management's response, Earl was concerned for his employees; and Bill, Josh and David were concerned with the credibility of the HTI News. They all wanted what was best for the organization, but each participant viewed the organization from a different perspective. Two factors that influenced the negotiation process are credibility and competitiveness.

In the case study at hand, the persons who had input into the preparation of the written piece made their contributions from the perspectives of how they--each as an individual--defined the needs of the organization and how those needs could best be met with controlled communication. Bill underscored the dilemma in the questions with which he dealt in the process of everyday public relations work:

> How do we preserve the integrity of what we're trying to do in terms of autonomy for the HTI News and Tech Topics? . . . [How do we] preserve respect in that we are part of the management team, just like other folks are . . . [How do we preserve] the integrity of what we're trying to do with open and honest communications, and frank communications, and believable integrity in communications?

Bill said the challenge as public relations professionals was to "walk a fine line between serving the demands and needs of management and of employees. A key to their autonomy, then, was credibility--the ability to maintain "believable integrity" with management and employees.

The concern with credibility was with the message and the medium. Credibility was a primary concern in the plant closing story. In addition to the corporate philosophy of "open and honest communication," David used the results of the formal and informal surveys--in which the in-house publications were criticized for being "happy news" sheets--as the fulcrum to reopen negotiations to print the story after Josh and Bill had given up. Because David defined himself as a professional journalist, he was less dissuaded by the sensitivity to management politics than Josh and Bill. David fought for the credibility of his publication, a key component in his definition of himself as a professional. He explained:

> If you try to present an organization as all good with no problems . . . people are going to disbelieve you, and your credibility is shot. Once your credibility is shot, you might as well hang it up and go find another business because in public relations we're trying to communicate with various publics and if they don't believe that you're telling the truth then you're shooting yourself in the foot. People know that everything's not all roses and nice. Credibility is the primary reason

> that you have to be honest and give the good with the bad, and the bad with the good.

It was Josh and Bill, however, who tempered David's concern for the credibility of the medium with their concern for the credibility of the public relations staff with management. The three men shared the importance of maintaining credibility from different perspectives that blended, tempered, and strengthened their approach to different situations.

Another aspect of credibility that played an important part in the negotiation process was an awareness that the people who would read HTI News had access to a variety of other publications and information. The reality of Unitronics presented in the in-house publication was only one of several realities about the organization to which any given person had access. With the plant closing story, for example, Bill, Josh and David were concerned about how employees would react when they read about the closing in the trade publications and not in the HTI News. David articulated this concern:

> You still have a lot of layers in there, middle management and the old guard, that still feel that the company newspaper is no place for "dirty laundry" . . . But all the pressure and the proliferation of the different media that people have access to have all been combined to open up communications for people and I think that's one of the reasons it's very important to deal with things like that [emphasis added].

The awareness of the access to other sources of information, and the need to be a credible source within that context were important criteria in the negotiation process. For Josh and Bill, who were more keenly aware of the concerns of management and who defined themselves as management, credibility was tempered with the concerns of competitiveness.

The concept of competitiveness embraces two very distinct components: First, competitiveness is the concern with proprietary information--with not tipping off the competition, leaking information that might disrupt the work force, or in any way endangering the ability of the organization to earn a profit. Second, competitiveness is the bottom line rationale to the traditional management system from which the organization was in transition from the "don't tell them if they don't need to know" way of handling information to a more open system. In the process of the transition, however, managers and communications workers alike were trying to define what the bottom line rationale to communication was. The multiple definitions of what the organization should be were conflicting. The tension was pervasive in the

organization and telescoped in the negotiation for control over newsletter content, as Josh explained:

> In this transition, one of the things we have constantly are conflicts. The editor of our publications would like to just have complete openness and many of the elements of the organization don't want that openness for the [competitive] reasons I've given, and so there's an area of conflict there which you have to resolve.

The resolution of that conflict took place in the process of negotiation.

Summary

Although the findings of a case study are not generalizable, this study of a mixed organization suggests a number of factors that may contribute to understanding the autonomy of public relations practitioners as professionals in organizations. The ability to control information in an in-house publication was used as a measure of autonomy.

A primary influence was time, as L. Grunig suggests. The impact of time on autonomy varied. Time restrictions imposed by deadlines had the following impact on the public relations professionals' ability to control the content of the newsletter:

1. Long lead times increased control by facilitating the professional's ability to negotiate for control of content.
2. Lead times bracketed by deadlines, however, also increased control over content by limiting the number of people involved in the clearance process.
3. Lack of time resulting from immanent deadlines decreased control over content. Conversely, the same situation in a crisis situation with the media increased control. The mitigating element in both situations was ownership of information. If the media owned the information, the public relations professionals had greater control over what would be released. If the organization owned the information, the public relations professionals had less control.
4. Time bracketed by deadlines could also be used by sources to keep information from the public relations professionals.

The corporate philosophy, which incorporated the values of the dominant coalition, was used by public relations professionals as a weapon in their battle with management for control over distribution of information. The

mandate of "open and honest communications," for example, was an articulated component in their negotiations with others and among themselves.

Credibility was an important measure of control over information. The concern for the credibility of both the medium and the message on the part of both management and employees was an important factor in the negotiation process. Public relations professionals "walked a fine line" in an attempt to serve both audiences well. The personal credibility of public relations professionals was based, in part, on the trustworthiness of the person. That trustworthiness was established in some instances based on personal relatedness with individuals within the organization (i.e. Bill's comment that Theresa and Tom gave him confidential information knowing that he would not reveal it), and in other instances on the public relations person's position within the organization (the people whom I interviewed for the supplier story gave me confidential information because I was from the Communications and Advertising Department, even though I had been with the organization less than two weeks).

The availability of resources also contributed to autonomy. David was able to provide expanded coverage of some issues because I was in the work place as an unpaid intern. The stories I wrote were ones that did not fit into his schedule.

Of importance here as well is the realization that complete autonomy was not necessarily desirable. Public relations professionals defined themselves as generalists who relied on specialists within the organization to provide them with such information as legal counsel and an understanding of technical language. Public relations professionals also negotiated heavily with management in an attempt to define competitive information. On the one hand, they relied on the counsel of others to know what information might either tip off the competition or disrupt the work force. On the other hand, they fought against the traditional management philosophy of not providing any information unless there was a critical "need to know."

The influences presented here contribute to a broader understanding of the variable degrees of autonomy of the public relations practitioners as professionals in the organization. Although the newsletter was used as a focus for this argument, the patterns of negotiation for control and consensus presented here were seen repeatedly in other circumstances in the study site as well. Although several of the influences discussed focused on individual

levels of power, the power of the department is a combination of individual power and other influences, including those presented here. The use of a case study facilitated the uncovering of new factors to explore in the quest to understand the relationship between public relations professionals and organizational power.

Works Cited

Abrahamson, Mark, ed. The Professional in the Organization. Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1967.

Altheide, David L. Creating Reality: How TV News Distorts Events. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1976.

Bernays, Edward. "Public Relations Practitioners for Licensing and Registration." Public Relations Quarterly. 31:10 (1986).

Birkhead, Douglas. "Presenting the *Press:* Journalism and the Professional Project." Diss. U of Iowa, 1982.

Bissland, James H. and Terry Lynn Rentner. "Public Relations' Quest for Professionalism: An Empirical Study." Unpub. paper presented to Public Relations Div. of Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Portland, July 1988.

--and Terry Lynn Renter. "Goal Conflict and Its Implications for Public Relations Practitioners: A National Survey." Unpub. paper presented to Educators Section of the Public Relations Society of America. Cincinnati, October 1988.

Brownell, Mark A. and Walter E. Niebauer Jr. "Toward Increasing Professionalism in Public Relations: An Activity-Specific System for Categorizing Practitioners." Unpub. paper presented to Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Portland, July 1988.

Center, Allen H. "Is Our Profession Ready to Conquer the New Challenges?" Public Relations Review. 13.1 (1987): 10-12.

Chartier, Roger. Introduction. The Management of Professional Employees. Annual White-Collar Personnel Seminar held by the Industrial Relations Centre, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, 1968.

Dingwall, Robert, and Philip Lewis, eds. The Sociology of the Professions: Lawyers, Doctors and Others. London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1985 (First ed. 1983).

Etzioni, Amitai, ed. Introduction. The Semi-Professionals and Their Organization: Teachers, Nurses, Social Workers. New York: The Free Press, 1969.

Fishman, Mark. Manufacturing the News. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980.

Gans, Herbert J. Deciding What's News. New York: Pantheon Books, 1979.
Goode, William J. "The Theoretical Limits of Professionalization." The Semi-Professionals and Their Organization: Teachers, Nurses, Social Workers. Amitai Etzioni, ed. New York: The Free Press, 1969.

Grunig, James E. "Organizations and Public Relations: Testing a Communication Theory." Journalism Monographs. 46 (1976).

--and Larissa Schneider Grunig. "Toward a Theory of the Public Relations Behavior of Organizations: Review of a Program of Research." Public Relations Research Annual. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1989.

--and Todd Hunt. Managing Public Relations. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984.

Harries-Jenkins, G. "Professionals in Organizations." Professions and Professionalization. Ed. J. A. Jackson. Cambridge: The University Press, 1970: 51-108.

Haskell, Thomas L., ed. Introduction. The Authority of Experts: Studies in History and Theory. Bloomington: Inidana University Press, 1984.

Hesse, Michael. "Standardizing Public Relations Education: A Pink Paper." Demonstrating Public Relations Professionalism. Public Relations Society of America, 1987: 26-27.

Kendall, Robert. "The Body of Knowledge in the Public Relations Profession." IPRA Review. (May 1984) 8-10. in James K. VanLeuven. "Public Relations Body of Knowledge: A Task Force Report." Public Relations Review. 13.4 (1987): 11-18.

Kornhauser, William. "The Interdependence of Professionals and Organizations." Professionalization. Eds. Howard M. Vollmer and Donald L. Mills. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1966.

Larson, Magali Sarfatti. The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis. Berkely: University of California Press, 1977.

Lincoln, Yvonna S. and Egon G. Guba. Naturalistic Inquiry. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1985.

Nayman, Oguz, Blaine K. McKee and Dan L. Lattimore. "PR Personnel and Print Journalists: A Comparison of Professionalism." Journalism Quarterly. 54.3 (1977): 492-497.

Pratt, Cornelius. "Professionalism in Nigerian Public Relations." Public Relations Review. 12.4 (1986)" 27-41.

Price, James L. and Charles W. Mueller. Handbook of Organizational Measurement. White Plains: Longman Inc., 1986.

Public Relations Society of America. A Design for Public Relations Education. Approved by Public Relations Society of America (1987).

--Demonstrating Public Relations Professionalism. New York: Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education (1987).

LS5075.47

--The Stature and Role of Public Relations. New York: Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education (1980).

--Terminology Report. Approved by the 1988 Spring Assembly of the Public Relations Society of America.

Ritzer, George. "Professionalism and the Individual." The Professions and Their Prospects. Ed. Eliot Freidson. Beverly Hills: Sage Publication, 1973 (First ed. 1971.)

Ryan, Michael. "Organizational Constraints on Corporate Public Relations Practitioners." Journalism Quarterly. 64.2-3 (1987): 473-482.

--and David L. Martinson. "Public Relations Practitioners, Public Interest and Management." Journalism Quarterly. 62.1 (1985): 111-115.

Schneider, Larissa. "The Role of Public Relations in Four Organizational Types." Journalism Quarterly. 62.3 (1985): 567-576.

Scott, W. Richard. "Professional Employees in a Bureaucratic Structure: Social Work." The Semi-Professionals and Their Organization: Teachers, Nurses, Social Workers. Ed. Amitai Etzioni. New York: The Free Press, 1969.

Serini, Shirley A. Public Relations Work: Organizational and Professional Context for the Social Construction of Reality. Unpub. dissertation. Univ. of Iowa, 1990.

Sharpe, Melvin L. "Recognition Comes from Consistently High Standards." Public Relations Review. 12.4 (1986): 17-25.

Soloski, John. "News Reporting and Professionalism: Some Constraints on the Reporting of the News." Unpub. Paper. n.d.

--"The Organizational Nature of News: A Study of a Middle-Size Newspaper." Diss. U of Iowa, 1978.

Tuchman, Gaye. Making News. New York: The Free Press, 1978.

Turk, Judy VanSlyke. "Pro Visions." Public Relations Journal. 43.2 (1987): 28-29.

VanLeuven, James K. "Public Relations Body of Knowledge: A Task Force Report." Public Relations Review. 13.4 (1987). 11-18.

--"Voids in the Public Relations Literature Based on the PRSA Body of Knowledge Project." Unpub. paper presented to the Educators Section of the Public Relations Society of America. Los Angeles, 1987.

Walker, Albert. "Documentation of the Body of Public Relations Knowledge," draft report copy submitted to the Foundation for Public Relations Research and Education (1987) in James K. Van Leuven. "Public Relations Body of Knowledge: A Task Force Report." Public Relations Review. 13.4 (1987): 11-18.

--"Public Relations Education: 1983 Survey and Report." Public Relations Review. 10.1 (1984): 18-29.

Wilensky, Harold L. "The Professionalization of Everyone?" The American Journal of Sociology. 70.2 (1964): 137-158.